

## Pastoral Address 2010

### The Greatness of God - He is at work in His World!

Afghanistan. Iraq. Darfur. Tsunami. Earthquakes. We all know these words today and associate them with bad news. Closer to home: economic crisis and political scandal. In the church: moral corruption, alienation, disillusionment and dwindling numbers are also terms we know and associate with bad news. We would be justified in asking: “Where is God? Is he still great? Is he still at work in his world?”

Robert walked into the Funky Fish youth cafe in Bandon one night. Earlier that day he had been released from prison in Cork. He had been jailed for a year for drugs and violence. Prior to his imprisonment he had drifted in and out of the Funky Fish and, on some occasions, the police were called because of his actions. So he knew Patrick Dobbin, one of the Funky Fish staff.

This particular night, Robert looked despondent and depressed. Patrick asked him how he was. Robert reported that he had no place to stay and no money for food. Patrick then asked how much he needed and suggested that they go to the ATM down the street. Patrick got the money and handed it over. Right there in the street, the Spirit of God came on Robert. He began to cry. He said to Patrick “why would you do this? For me? You know me!” Patrick invited him back to the Funky Fish where Robert gave his life to Christ. Since then, he has completed 9 months at a drug rehabilitation centre in Drogheda and is currently in steady employment and attending Donnybrook Church in Cork.

When the first disciples were put to the test, testimony was their apologetic “... one thing I know: once I was blind, now I see”. (Jn. 9). The implication in 1 Corinthians 15 is that Paul is suggesting to those whose faith is lacking that they enquire from those many witnesses who are still alive and can testify to the truth of the resurrection events. For those who witnessed such things in the past, and for those who, like Robert, witness them today, the greatness of God and his work in the world is not questioned. God is still great and is working to accomplish his purpose, building his world church and not even the forces of Hell will stop it (Matt. 19).

Within Protestantism, the World Mission Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910, signified some new thinking about the possibility of the church as a global reality. One hundred years later, that understanding of church is taken for granted. However, much of the world view underlying the Edinburgh 1910 Conference is still prevalent today. European and North American delegates dominated the conference, so they became the “us” of the “home church” and the world beyond North America and Europe was the “them” of the “mission field”. The Edinburgh delegates might be excused for thinking like this, but the centre of gravity of the church has now shifted to Asia, Latin America and Africa. This church is the church of the majority world.

This current state of affairs hints at parallels in the New Testament. The “us” and “home church” was Jerusalem and the Jewish Christians. The “them” and “mission field” was Antioch and the Gentile converts. The book of the Acts of the Apostles soon discloses the tension between this Jerusalem church, espousing adherence to its strong theological heritage, and a flourishing Gentile mission now thinking its theology beyond the confines of Jerusalem. Writing to a maturing church, the author of Ephesians has these two parties in mind. It is

suggested in Chapter 2 of Ephesians that God brings both groups into one (Eph. 2:11-22), not in the sense of one group controlling the other, but of them being mutually beneficial.

The positive aspiration announced in Ephesians seems to demonstrate the way God works. Can it be a parallel, a lesson and a vision for the church today? In the first centuries of the church, theology had clearly moved away from the culture and language of Judaism and was being thought about and expressed in Greek. This forced a particular specificity on third and fourth century Christians which enabled them to describe more accurately such great doctrinal issues as Trinity and Incarnation. Latin, German and English (among others) are the dominant languages of theology which bring us to 2010. As the majority world church grows in stature, what revelations of God will be possible when theology is given its voice in Mandarin, Korean, Swahili or Gujarat?



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Another parallel is that the theological academy within Judaism resembled Post-Enlightenment Europeans and North Americans: Empiricism ruled at the expense of the miraculous. Not so in the majority world church today, where the spirit world described and assumed in the New Testament fits comfortably in much of Asia, Latin America and Africa. The Pentecostal church with its spirit emphasis is well received in these places and has captured much of the territory which was once the domain of Roman Catholicism.

The “home church” of Europe and North America is being eclipsed by the majority world church. God is revealing himself in new ways, through new languages and new people. The spirit world of the New Testament is a significant part of the experience and testimony of this growing church.

Jogeshwar Naik, the son of a Hindu high priest, grew up in North India. He became a Christian in 1980 and was driven out of his home. This did not stop him from telling the people he met about Jesus. One day, the Rev. Senapati met him and asked him to work with the church. Then, after some Bible training he was ordained into the church of North India by Bishop Tandy.

In his continuing work of witness he was challenged one day by a Sadhu (Hindu Saint) about this “powerful and only living God” whom Jogeshwar preached. The Sadhu said his wife was dying and that if Jogeshwar was so confident about what he preached, this God should be put to the test. Jogeshwar went with the man in fear. At the house of the Sadhu he felt he did not have enough strength on his own to pray and, strangely, asked if the Hindu family would pray to the Christian God also. They prayed for twenty minutes. After the prayer the man said that if his wife got better he would take baptism. Nothing had happened immediately, so Jogeshwar went home.

That night he told his wife and children and they all decided to pray together for four hours. The next morning the Sadhu’s two sons were waiting outside Jogeshwar’s home. He feared they had come to beat him. But they announced their mother’s healing - and also that the family wanted to become Christian. Jogeshwar went back to the Hindu house and took away all their threads,

idols and puja items, prayed and burned them all. Jogeshwar says, “The whole village was a burst with the news that their priest had converted to Christianity”.

A week later a herd of elephants came through the village destroying gardens and crops. But, Jogeshwar reports “...a miracle happened ... The village people could not imagine so all the villagers went to have a look. It was really a weird scene as all farms were destroyed and this farm which was also in the path of the elephants was the only one untouched. More amazing for the villagers was that this farm belonged to the man and the family who had recently taken baptism. This was a big thing and soon after 80% of the villagers got baptised by Bishop Tandy”.

When John the Baptist’s disciples came to Jesus to ask him if he were the real thing or should they wait for an other, Jesus invited them to look around and see the miraculous things that were happening. (Matt. 11) This, according to Jesus, was evidence that God was at work. If we accept the testimonies of Robert and Jogeshwar surely it points to the same great God who continues today to perform the miraculous in the lives of people.

God’s greatness seems to suggest a reference to his being, whereas God at work in his world is more about his doing. On its own, theology - God studied, in this case for his greatness, can be an aloof appreciation and appraisal of God’s attributes. However, such a great God at work in the world shrinks this remoteness and draws him in close to touch the world, and brings testimony from those like Robert and Jogeshwar whose lives have been changed by his greatness.

All religions consider their god or gods to be great. In that general sense the Christian God is no different. In the monotheistic religions of Islam and Judaism many of the attributes of greatness and the terminology describing them is mutually shared. The Christian God, however, is awarded a dimension of greatness which is not shared by other religions: He is understood to exist eternally in trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and thereby becomes relational in his very nature, a relationship which makes love possible at the heart of God. For the Christian, God is great because God is love.

Of course, such analysis is only possible because of God’s revelation through his word and through his Son, Jesus Christ. The great God of creation redeems a fallen world in a great act of love: God the Son dies a sacrificial death so that the love relationship of the Trinity can extend to, and include a redeemed humanity. In this sense, God’s greatness and work has already been demonstrated in the world.

Nevertheless, God continues the work of building his church in the world. The complexion of that church, in its majority world context, is challenging the imagination of old western authority. Often we in the West are tempted to observe and comment critically, like those Judaizers who followed and frustrated Paul on his Gentile mission. One hundred years after Edinburgh 1910, it is perhaps time to anticipate good news for the church. If, at the invitation of Jesus, we look around and find testimony which proves God is at work, then perhaps the message of Ephesians should encourage us to imagine with God new and exciting possibilities for the world church, possibilities that will fulfil the aspiration of Edinburgh 1910: to introduce to all nations and peoples the God whose greatness and work are established, both in his son Jesus, and in the church he is preparing.  
*(Testimonies by kind permission.)*